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The room is unfamiliar. I don't know how I got here. But I know it to be a prison cell, cold and dank.

I remember that the Praesidium of Magistrates say I am to die. They say I killed a man, that I am a murderer. Maybe these things are true, but they are only part of the truth.

They say that Headsman Taliesan has been summoned from the Royal Palace, that he is to arrive on Fairday. That noon on Fairday is to be the hour of my death.

They say Pastor Yakob shall tend to my spiritual needs, so that I may repent and save my immortal soul. Yet, I have no fear for my immortal soul, did our Lord Kristos not teach that the pure in heart shall see The Glory of the Gods?

In my cell, I sleep beneath a scant eiderdown that does not ward away the creeping cold, my head upon pillows that hold the remnant nightmares of every lost soul who has slept here before me.

As I awake, I see each exhalation of my life's breath. On the other side of the room I see the breath and shape of another. Pastor Yakob sits

motionless astride a stool beneath the cell window.

I know him but vaguely, for lower servants such as I were never much welcome in church on Sabbath, unless there to tend to mistress or master.

My master, Alderman Ethelred, usually ordained to worship alone, that I might remain at home to prepare a Sabbath feast for his return.

Alderman Ethelred. The man I killed.

As an Elder in a town of half-starved merchants, Ethelred strutted his girth from shop to

shop, haggling for the best price, no matter if the shopkeeper made a loss. In a land where villagers walked barefoot, he rode about on a chestnut Shire mare. In an austere time of starving cattle and failing crops, he insisted that his social underlings should kiss his golden ring.

The Pastor speaks. 'Miss Katerin, I have been appointed by the Praesidium to hear your confession and prepare your immortal soul for eternity. Magistrate Eisen says you have yet to admit your crime. You must repent if you wish the Boatman to ferry you across The

River and know The Glory of the Gods.'

His speaks earnestly, the voice of a young boy in the body of a man. He wears the garb of a priest with a collar that is too big around his thin neck and stubble shadows his handsome face, though he looks barely old enough to be entrusted with a shaving blade.

'Pastor Yakob, the Praesidium of Magistrates did not suffer me to speak. I got no trial. They saw the bloodstained garments I still wore as I stood before them, the blood of their former confrere. In but an instant did they decide upon my

guilt. No advocate was appointed to state my case. I am an orphan girl, Pastor, raised by the Nonnes in the Abbey. I have no family or friends to speak for me. Goodsister Blythe may have done so, but she lies in the Abbey Boneyard, consumed by this past Midwinter's plague.'

'Then, I shall hear you, Miss Katerin. Speak to me as a confidante. Confess to me your sins. I am neither judge, jury nor executioner, I merely wish to prepare your immortal soul. Standing before the only judge that matters, on the Shores of Heaven, it will be too late for repentance.'

‘Pastor, I have no sin to confess. I do not doubt that I shall be welcomed into The Glory of the Gods. For Lord Kristos, when he walked among us, did he not say the pure in spirit shall cross The River and enter Paradise?

I see by your face Pastor Yakob, you know not what to say. If you seek truth, here is the only truth that matters. I am to die on Fairday. I can only pray to Lord Kristos that Headsman Taliesan strikes a clean blow, that my death is painless. I have no fear besides that.’

The pastor rises, knocking over the stool in his haste.

‘I will return tomorrow, Miss Katerin, we will speak again. Please think on it.’

A storm howls through the glassless window. As I am about to fall into sleep, something startles me. It is the sound of an infant crying within the cell. A cold hand grasps my heart. On regaining my senses, reason takes hold. My mind is intent on tricking me, for it is but the cry of a wildcat or a nightbird in the woods. Sleep did not come.

Pastor Yakob sees my distress upon his morning arrival.

‘Miss Katerin?’

‘You want my repentance Pastor Yakob, well, I cannot grant you that, for all I have to offer you is my truth.’

The wind blows through the window yet, bringing a damp chill. I see the Pastor shiver. But he sits, and I begin.

‘How was I to know death had a smell? Or a taste, metallic, like a penny in the mouth? I didn’t know these things Pastor, any more than you. But I still carry the scent of it in my nostrils, the taste of it on my tongue.’

When Alderman Ethelred returned from Worship at midday on Sabbath, by the way he was slumped upon his mare, I could see he was already drunk. I was preparing his midday meal and saw him approach. I braced myself for I knew what to expect. As it was his custom to have a big lunch on that day, I was carving a chicken. He came from behind and grabbed me, one hand about my throat, the other about my waist.

This was not unusual. He whipped and beat me often. He accused me of stealing his eggs, drinking his brandy, sleeping too late. I knew what was coming, it had happened

so many times. There were nights he brought me to his bed as a husband brings a wife. On such nights, he was almost tender, as I imagine a husband might be. When he was drunk he acted as a bull to a cow.

I see I have shocked you, Pastor. But to whom could I turn? Again, I say, I am a friendless orphan who addresses her troubles to the chickens in the haggard and the mice that scurry through my room by night.

I had never resisted him before, but I had never had a knife in my hand before. I lashed out and cut

him. He staggered momentarily but came at me again. I ran towards him holding the knife before me with both hands. I plunged the blade again and again and again until I saw the life leave his eyes, so close to him I felt his last breath upon my face. His lifeblood pooled about me and I breathed in the smell of his death.'

I can see the Pastor is pale of pallor, even his lips are white.

The wind swirls through the window and there it is again, the sound of a crying infant. The hairs on my arms and neck bristle. If the Pastor hears it, he does not flinch.

He leaves with barely a word. Night is drawing in, the storm has passed and I can see, through the small window, the stars of Heaven lighting one by one.

He returns next morning in a state of great unease.

‘Miss Katerin, I fear I bring bad news. Taliesan has arrived a day early and is eager to complete his gruesome task. You are to die at noon today.’

My heart grows cold, yet I am ready.

‘Miss Katerin, what do you say?’

‘I say I am glad to hear it will be today for the waiting may be worse than the dying. I say, please Lord Kristos, guide the axe of Headsman Taliesan that my death may be swift, then welcome me into Heaven that I might enjoy The Glory of the Gods.’

‘I have entreated Magistrate Eisen, but the stubborn mule is not for turning. Miss Katerin, take my hand that we might pray together for your deliverance’

‘Ah but Pastor, you forget. The Era of Miracles has passed.’

Even so, I take his hand and draw comfort, not from the prayer, but

from his tender touch and the gentle nature of his soul.

As I enter the scaffold, I spy the Praesidium of Magistrates. Attired in purple robes, seated behind a bench, they dare not look in my direction. I am gladdened not to be such a coward as they.

Headsman Taliesan stands beside the block. He does not have an axe but a sword that gleams in the midday sun.

Although not Fairday, Market Square is crowded with those come to witness the death of the murdering witch-girl. Magistrate

Eisen approaches with a blindfold, hands atremble.

‘First I will say my piece.’ I say it loudly so the throng may hear.

‘It is written, she is allowed to speak!’ shouts a voice from the crowd. Pastor Yakob, may the Maiden Mother bless him.

‘Very well,’ the magistrate addresses me quietly, ‘but take care to not incite the crowd.’

‘And if I do, how shall you punish me?’

I begin. ‘People of Tallatsten, you have come to see me die today and you will call it justice. Perhaps

it is. It is a truth that I killed
Alderman Ethelred, as it is also a
truth that I did not murder him.

I confess I took the Alderman's
eggs and bread, more than his
cruelty allowed me as my ration,
but I took no more than I needed to
live. I confess I drank his brandy
when the pain of his whipping
caused me to weep. Are these
sins?

I am but a lowly house maid. Yet, I
go to the Gods with a pure spirit,
for the sins that were done to me
were not my sins. Is it a
transgression to be born to a
mother, bathed in her very

lifeblood, to draw my first breath even as she drew her last?

Is it my sin to fall pregnant to a man who brought me into his home as a child yet took me to his bed whenever he succumbed to his carnal desires? For it is another truth, that I carry within me Ethelred's child. But better this child die with me than live a life like mine, to be the worst thing it is to be in this town, invisible, ignored and despised.

So now, Headsman Taliesan, I say to you, I am ready, do your duty.'

‘Set her free,’ shouts the Pastor,
‘for she is with child and the child
has committed no crime.’

Oh Pastor Yakob, how I would have
loved you in another life.

A murmur grows as the crowd stirs
and the Pastor’s call is echoed by
others.

Headsman Taliesan binds my
hands and guides me towards the
block. Again, I refuse the blindfold.
As the bell tolls solemnly for
midday, the clamour of the crowd
grows ever louder. The executioner
looks towards the magistrates for
guidance, they nod as one in
affirmation. As I kneel to lay my

head upon the block, I turn my eyes towards the throng. I see them surge to the scaffold, Pastor Yakob at the head.

As the sword comes down, I speak my last word on Earth. I whisper, "Yakob."

Praise our Lord Kristos, for it is a swift and clean blow. The world spins. I see the magistrates engulfed by the mob, I see Yakob place his robe over my lifeless body and at last I leave my troubled world behind.

I am by The River and can hear small waves lapping on the Riverbank. The Ferryman punts

towards me. In my arms I hold an infant and on the far side two figures stand, one I know as Goodsister Blythe, the other I do not recognise, but in my heart I know it is my mother.

The Ferryman takes my hand and we cross The River to join the Glory of the Gods.